

# History of Duxbury

NORTH HILL I.—(By Dr. Alice H. Bigelow)

In the years when I was scouring the confines of our town on foot in search of flowers, berries, and adventure, my attention was caught by a rickety sign at the head of a lane. The lane leads from Tremont St. skirting the Edgar property. The sign reads faintly "North Hill." I let this go unchallenged for a year or two. Then I felt the stimulus of a visit from an old school friend with whom I had walked far and wide, both in Duxbury and at her summer home in Maine, and decided to explore.

We quickly covered the two miles from my house and entered the little road. It served two old houses lying on its right. The first, I was to learn, was the home of the three Bryant sisters, who became my friends, and the second, of Miss Laura Burgess. Both have been destroyed; the Bryant house by fire and the Burgess house to make way for farming land. After the houses, the road became dim and increasingly steep.

Looking ahead, we were startled to see no normal growth of trees but a chaos of up-ended trees. Pines and oaks stood on their heads or lay on their sides. Branches were on the ground and roots in the air. We have seen this state of things several times since. This was the summer of '99, and the previous November had brought the hurricane that sank the Portland and cut our beach in two.

There was no road to be seen, but we were out to climb, and steadily worked upward. To do it, we had to duck and crawl under great prone trunks, and clamber over others, with eyes on the sky. After a long struggle we sighted an elm, and I said "An elm means a house. It's a tame tree." We labored on and up toward the elm, and sure enough, it was in a clearing by a house. We had climbed North Hill.

Our only encounter on the way up was a friendly hedgehog in a thicket. In a later year, when passage had been cleared and I am here often, I met a beautiful deer, to his surprise and my delight.

## Now A Farm

The peak of North Hill was taken over by H. E. Merry and turned into a dairy farm, with clearance of the destruction and a wide planting of fodder. A great wooden gate which confined his cattle marked a patch of pennyroyal. This little herb is so small that we usually smell it before we see it. For years afterward I was to reach under that gate and snatch up a handful of its fragrance.

On the day of that first adventure my partner and I worked our way down to the road of our entrance and limped a little over the remaining two miles.

About that time, Eben Briggs' nature, which snatches back any uncle, who drove for Ford's store, land left unpruned for any length took me to call on the Bryant sisters, who lived in the lane near Tremont St. The walk to their house became a favorite with me and my neighbors, Mrs. Field, then Miss Montague. The oldest of the three Bryant sisters was an invalid, spending her time in a chair by the window. The only outlook was a gray barn and a heavy growth of young trees. These trees are the cruel inevitability of a jealous

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of the '98 gale, became a favorite goal for long summer walks. It is a pleasant wooded ridge, lying parallel to Tremont St., and a little to the west of it. Early maps show that in the 17th century Tremont St., or 3A, or the Plymouth road, ran close to the foot of North Hill, which carried it over the present site of the first church and the cemetery, joining the present road at Island Creek.

Geographically North Hill is interesting because on its slopes rise two of the town brooks, Hounds Ditch, and Malachi Brook. Hounds Ditch meets the headwaters of the Blue Fish River, and Malachi Brook reaches the sea by the Duck Hill River. These tidal channels are the boundaries of Powder Point.

Hounds Ditch comes from springs on the east slope and runs down to Tremont St. by the sites of the vanished Bryant and Burgess houses. A culvert takes it under Tremont St. Crossing a meadow, it meets the line of the old railroad track. Orchids, forget-me-nots, and cardinal flowers used to live at this junction with snakes and sizeable turtles.

## Historic Site

Running on through a thicket known as Fraser's swamp, or Major Alden's swamp, it flows down to a pond because Wright's dike cuts across it a little later. On the edge of this pond is the small stone marker indicating the site of the first Alden house. The pond drains out through a sluice, picking up a tributary that has run across the golf links, and joins the salt water of the Blue Fish River.

On the far side of North Hill starts Malachi Brook, it runs rapidly at first, then slows, for this, too, is dammed, with the result of a long pond. Somber dead trees show that it wasn't always a pond. The site of this dam goes by the name of Priest's mill, but the mill and the miller's house are destroyed and the confined water irrigates a cranberry bog.

The escaping water runs down to West St., or Route 14, and goes under it confined in concrete. This is a grief to older people like me, because once that brook brawled out in the open beside the road and passing horses waded through it to drink. The nearest house is the Ryder House, still retained in the family. One of the women told me years ago that a brother who had spent a happy holiday in Boston, walking home from the railroad station and crossing the brook on its bridge, flung into it, as a gesture of satiety, his remaining money, which was two cents.

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Malachi Brook is slowed again as it nears Tremont St., which dams it again, which gives up the pretty pond by the water works, near the site of Ford's Store. It is released down the slope to the salt marsh and works out through the Duck Hill River. I learned the name of this brook as Malachi. My earliest map, however, calls it Mill Brook, which name might have been lent to the district which the stream traverses.

## Other Memories

Near North Hill are several cellar holes, indicating burned houses. There are two near Tremont St. and another on the far side, by Priest's mill. Still another lies in a large open area reached from Mayflower St. and facing the long pond made by damming. This house was once occupied by a family named Higgins. Strolling across the yard, I sometimes stopped to talk with Mrs. Higgins as she stood washing in the shade of an apple tree, while our dogs exchanged greetings, courteous but guarded. This house burned down and its site is a little dreary. Gaarled apple trees show ancient residence. The great shade tree carries the sign "No Shooting," at which I always smile, for I am not a killer.

## Mysterious Eels

There is much to be seen in these brooks and ponds. A few years ago I sat down to rest on the dam at Priest's mill before the cranberry bog was installed. With me was my next door neighbor, Miss Field. We peered down into the sluice of rapidly escaping water and suddenly realized that the stream was a mass of squirming black life. "Baby snakes," I cried out. This was foolish, for snake families do not run in the hundreds. "No, eels," said my partner, scooping up a few wiggling little bodies. "See their fins." And eels they were, about four inches long, struggling desperately upstream against the current. Where did they come from, and where were they going? There were books at home, and the story was soon dug out.

These babies hatched westward of the West Indies, and, when old enough to swim, came up on the Gulf Stream, entering every opening on the coast. Far inland they worked, to live in fresh water. Only in the last year of life would they go down to the sea, to mate and die.

One of the Higgins boys once escorted me over a very devious path along the pond by his house. He

said convincingly that this was the snakiest path in the town. I came to believe it, making acquaintance with the red and brown water dwellers which came out mostly to sun, but consorted with the eels.

At the foot of the long Higgins pond I once gleefully found an abandoned snake skin, left by its owner who had outgrown it, and the tail had been given a half-hitch about a small post to procure a cinch on it when the pull came. The long body of the skin floated out in the wind. This is my best snake story and it's true. I'm not going to spoil it by claiming a clove-hitch.

As I recall these friendly brooks on a winter afternoon in the city, I realize that they are not nearly so obvious as they used to be. They crossed our roads with their bright brown streams under brief wooden bridges. It was human nature to slow down and look over the railing, and there was often a reward in some interesting form of life. We felt their friendliness. The modern demands of swift and heavy traffic have suppressed these streams, treating them like sewers. They are run under our macadam roads in culverts or between concrete blocks, often out of sight.

The roads are all right for racing gasoline engines, but they have lost something of a sweet reality that should be theirs.



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